

Honorable Chief Justice of Bhutan, Cabinet Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Excellencies, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for joining us for the Swiss National Day celebration, marking my country's 727th birthday. I am so happy to be among you here in Thimphu. The relations between Switzerland and Bhutan are unique and special, as they go back to the friendship between two remarkable personalities, His Majesty the Third King and Swiss entrepreneur Fritz von Schulthess-Rechberg. Their strong bond led to an enduring Swiss presence over the years, namely through Helvetas and later the Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development. Countless projects and collaborations were implemented, in areas such as health care, forestry and agriculture. And they are ongoing. I think of course of Helvetas, but also of many other official and private actors such as the Swiss Red Cross, the Canton of Zurich, the Federal Administrative Court of St. Gallen, the Swiss and Liechtenstein Foundation for Archeology. I think of peacekeeping courses offered by the Swiss Army or vocational training by Swiss institutes enterprises. And I know the list of collaborations is far from complete, as, together with my team, I discover new initiatives at every visit. So many Swiss citizens carry the sister mountain country in their hearts, strive for the happiness it embodies and try to contribute.

Our relations have now entered a new phase. Eighteen months ago, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation withdrew from Bhutan, after more than 35 years of productive activity. The Cooperation office closed. While this was not an easy decision, it was the logical consequence of Bhutan's tremendous progress towards development. But let me reassure you. Switzerland is here to stay and be active, no longer as a development partner but as one half of a full-fledged partnership between equals. This shared vision was reaffirmed during the February meeting in Berne between His Excellency Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and Swiss President Alain Berset.

The two sides decided to implement a whole series of projects, starting with the most important one, symbolizing the new dynamic between the two countries, the first ever visit by a Swiss business delegation to Bhutan. This trip is currently under preparation and interested Swiss companies are expected here in the spring of 2019. My Embassy is planning other projects. Two examples: Professor George van Driem, an expert on Bhutanese linguistics, will participate in the Mountain Echo Festival and two Bhutanese journalists are invited to join a study trip to Switzerland, focusing on digital technology and innovation. Because my Embassy and team are in faraway Delhi, it was indispensable to build up a strong local presence to support us. With the blessing of the Bhutanese authorities, Switzerland decided to open an Honorary Consulate in Thimphu. It is my great pleasure and honour to officially introduce today Lyonpo Dr. Kinzang Dorji, in his new function as the first ever Honorary Consul of Switzerland in Bhutan.

In the person of Dr. Dorji, my country has a most worthy representative, a former Minister of Agriculture, of Works and Human Settlement, acting Foreign Minister and Finance Minister, and twice Prime Minister. Add to that his presidency, for the past 8 years, of the Bhutan-Switzerland Society. We really look forward to partnering with him for this new phase of the bilateral relationship. The Bhutan-Switzerland Society is an indispensable partner in this enterprise. I wish to thank its members for their dedication to the friendship between the two countries.

I have talked about the many individual and institutional bonds that unite us, about the projects we pursue. Let me add one word about the values we share, from our love for the mountains and a preserved environment to a stubborn, deliberate streak of independence. This Bhutanese proverb could apply just as well to the Swiss: "You must first walk around a bit before you can understand the distance from the valley to the mountain". As the representative of one of the oldest democracies in the world, though it is definitely not 727 years old, I can assure you that our common commitment to democracy is central. We wish all the best to the Kingdom of Bhutan and to its citizens, as they are about to engage in the third democratic elections of the National Assembly.

For this very special National Day Celebration, we wanted to bring to Bhutan a touch of Swiss traditional music. I am most grateful to the two musicians who have travelled from the Canton of Appenzell to join us. Mr. Christian Näf will perform on a typical Swiss instrument, the Hackbrett, and Mr. Martin Inauen will play the accordion. They will be followed, and ultimately joined, by the Bhutanese musician Jigme Drukpa, thus linking in sound our two mountain cultures. Again, thank you to all of you for joining us this afternoon and I look forward to the programme.

At this point let me express my deep gratitude to His Majesty the King of Bhutan, who has graciously offered us a marvelous cake on the occasion of our National Day.

But now the moment has come, on this very special National Day, to formally initiate the mandate of Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji as the first Honorary Consul of Switzerland in Bhutan. Congratulations!